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Review of *Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds* by Arseli Dokumacı (Duke University Press)

by Emalee Crews | Book Reviews, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT *Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds* by Arseli Dokumacı builds upon theories of affordances through the concept of "activist affordances," which describes the "performative microacts/-arts through which disabled people enact and bring into being the worlds that are not already available to them, the worlds they need and wish to dwell in" (5). *Activist Affordances* takes a non-Westernized view of disability that makes room for the complexities of pain, illness, and the nonhuman world. Dokumacı's *Activist Affordances* is a necessary and fresh expansion of disability—beyond the Western conception of the term—that encompasses the disablement of other species in order to resist human exceptionalism, and to better address the destruction colonization, racialization, and capitalism has wrought on the earth and its inhabitants. *Activist Affordances* is a widely applicable piece of scholarly literature that offers strategies for survival in our increasingly precarious world.

KEYWORDS disability, environmental humanities, performance, worldmaking

Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds. By Arseli Dokumacı. Durham: Duke Unversity Press, 336 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1924-4. US List $28.95.

Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds by Arseli Dokumacı builds upon theories of affordances through her concept of "activist affordances" that describes the "performative microacts/-arts through

which disabled people enact and bring into being the worlds that are not already available to them, the worlds they need and wish to dwell in" (5). Dokumacı makes clear, however, that activist affordances are not just performed by those living with chronic pain, chronic illness, mental suffering, and other disabilities. Instead, activist affordances are an orientation to an ever-shrinking world for marginalized populations. The concept of "shrinkage" is one that Dokumacı returns to throughout the book that expresses the ways in which the environment—which she refers to as "available affordances"—becomes constricted or constrained by the experience of disablement or pain to the degree that one must invent new affordances in order to survive. Those with impaired bodies and/or minds *have to* create affordances, sometimes just out of their bodies, in order to undertake necessary, life-sustaining actions. Dokumacı's *Activist Affordances* is a necessary and fresh expansion of disability beyond the Western conception of the term to encompass disablement of other species in order to resist human exceptionalism and better address the destruction colonization, racialization, and capitalism has wrought on the earth and its inhabitants. Through a 12-year ethnographic engagement spanning Istanbul specifically as well as Turkey more broadly, Florida, North Wales, Montreal, Copenhagen, and London, with individuals living with inflammatory types of arthritis who experience chronic pain and other debilitations–and who may or may not identify with the term disabled–Dokumacı produces a visual ethnography that employs disability as method.

Dokumacı splits her book into two parts. Part 1, "Shrinkage," contains four chapters that explore, expand, and crip James Gibson's original theory of affordance and offers the concept of shrinkage to describe the shifts in the available affordances in the environment as a result of changes in the body or mind. Within this section, Dokumacı attends to her borrowing of the theory of affordances from Gibson with extreme care and respect, in line with Sara Ahmed's proposed consideration for "the act of following." Dokumacı includes different situations experienced by individuals with varying levels of impairment to foreground the frictions between the theory of affordance and the partial,

incomplete, or long-lasting painful affordances experienced by impaired and/or disabled people. She notes two areas of friction with the traditional theory of affordances: first, to account for partial affordances; and, second, the shifting, appearing, and disappearing of potential affordances as bodies and illnesses change over time.

Part 2, "Performance," comprises the rest of the six chapters and further refines and elaborates on the theory of activist affordances through a visual ethnography of the tiny acts disabled people commit to imagine the world otherwise: DIY adaptive insoles, people as affordances, button-up shirts as pullovers, pliers as jar openers, and teeth as tools, to name a few.

Dokumacı makes major theoretical contributions to disability studies through her introduction of terms that expand how we might discuss the complexities of disability. The "habitus of ableism," for example, challenges the traditional models of disability and focuses on "how a collective system of beliefs, habits, and dispositions that are deeply ingrained in our ways of acting, perceiving, and behaving can automatically make the affordances of the world more available to some bodies/minds than to others" (20). Shrinkage, as explained above, occurs because of the habitus of ableism that enforces ways of perceiving affordances that make it difficult to imagine affordances otherwise, a necessary skill for those experiencing disablement and impairment. Activist affordances, thus, arise out of shrinkage; an accessible form of worldmaking that does not require materials or capital to come into being but is instead created out of bodies and imaginations. These tiny micro acts are ephemeral and fleeting. However, Dokumacı argues that these performances remain and form a "disability repertoire" made up of bodily memory and the imprint on the environment. This repertoire enables the transferability to others experiencing constraints on their environment and thus their available affordances.

Activist Affordances takes a non-westernized view of disability that makes room for the complexities of pain, illness, and the nonhuman world. Activist affordances perform a dance of labor that imagines the world otherwise, especially in areas of the world without financial and infrastructural access to adaptive tools and technologies. Given the book's perspective, I was surprised by Dokumacı's limited use of José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queer utopia, as it is only briefly mentioned in the introduction and final chapter of the book. Dokumacı's proposal "that we consider activist affordances as the outposts of actually existing accessible futures" (247) is a lovely one, but one that would be strengthened through more engagement with Muñoz throughout the text, building in a dynamic structure to the theory.

I am excited for the generative engagements Dokumacı's work is sure to open up, including the further articulation of how the theory of activist affordances can be applied to a diseased and dying planet. Dokumacı successfully expands Gibson's theory of affordances in an innovative and groundbreaking way. The theory of activist affordances will hopefully be cited in future scholarship that is engaged with critical disability studies, performance studies, and/or the environmental humanities. The second part of the book, "Performance" is an especially useful tool for disabled, chronically ill, chronically pained, and mentally ill folks to see the beauty of their tiny, everyday activist affordances, and for potentially generating new affordances not yet imagined. *Activist Affordances* is a widely applicable piece of scholarly literature that offers strategies for survival in our increasingly precarious world.

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Emalee Crews is a Cultural Studies PhD student at UC Davis. They are a queer disabled activist and student who explores the intersection of food sovereignty, food justice, critical disability studies, and crip futurity. Their work aims to build a nuanced understanding of queer/crip theory, food justice movements, and the cultural, psychological, and emotional connections communities form with food in order to construct sustainable food justice platforms for disabled people. They integrate decoloniality, anti-capitalism, theories of care, anarcho-mutual aid traditions, and spiritual wellness to understand the systems of oppression that limit access to food justice systems and traditional, cultural, natural, and/or unprocessed foods for disabled bodyminds.

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